

## Dis-embodying Regeneration

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Not so long ago, in a quiet house on a leafy street in Peckham, lived a Conceptual artist called John Latham who spoke of the 'least event'. Like his hero, John Cage, he understood that art had been undergoing a 'countdown to zero' from around the time of Delacroix. Latham believed art had finally reached the zero point in 1951, with the discovery of the most minimal gesture – the silent concert, the blank canvas. Now that spatial illusion had been scientifically and aesthetically proven to be a delusion – and therefore meaningless to pursue – the object of art was to reduce its elements down to a point of total compression, where all elements meet.<sup>1</sup> Like the (unknowable) starting point of the Big Bang, or like a musical score, the artwork would be the matrix of an indeterminate series of future events. This idea can be connected to Gilles Deleuze's notion of 'absolute immanence' – a matrix of 'infinite desubjectification', a continuous self-affecting becoming.<sup>2</sup> But this kind of aesthetic point zero took place in a world, and perhaps more importantly in cities, where there was a great deal more space and time than we have today. After all, to abolish spatial illusion required some room.

In 2006 John Latham died, and his house became an arts institution dedicated to the preservation and development of his ideas. In the studio at the bottom of the garden artists take up residencies, and are grateful for the breathing space. Even though the space is pretty small, and the time is ultimately not that long. But the aesthetic of reduction isn't what it used to be – and, as the latest resident-artist Alex Frost makes clear, this relates to the contemporary politics of space. When I visited Flat Time House, Frost commented that since his recent move back to London after 20 years in Glasgow, he could really see how the pressure on space created by London's insane property prices had driven artists to make more conceptual, less materialised artworks. Yet this isn't a 1960s style challenge to art's commodification, he conjectured, but the effect of high rents. Not the 'least event' then, but an aesthetic of auto-reduction.

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Countdown to Zero, Count up to Now: An Interview with the Artist Placement Group', Pauline van Mourik Broekman and Josephine Berry, *Mute*, 2002, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/countdown-to-zero-count-to-now-interview-artist-placement-group> (accessed 25 June 2015)

<sup>2</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, 'Absolute Immanence', in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, Redwood City, CA, 1999, p. 232.

*Property Guardian*, the title of Frost's end-of-residency exhibition, flags up the confusion arising from the intensified dynamic between art and space. With this term, he signals the shading into each other of artists' residencies and the use of artists by landlords to guarantee the value of their property. On the one hand, major property managers like Camelot use artists to fill vacant buildings, converting the cost of hiring security into revenue garnered from artists willing to pay low rents in exchange for very basic and unmaintained work spaces. Meanwhile arts organisations like Bow Arts Trust in the East End cynically disguise the same arrangement as benevolence, inviting artists to take up 'studio residencies' in decanted council flats and other transitional spaces that await demolition and/or gentrification. In *Property Guardian*, Frost places cues throughout the exhibition prompting reflection on how his own residency connects to these wider developments. His wall pieces, in which pet-food packaging has been heat-shrunk, cast in resin and set alongside small objects like plastic combs or pencils used to provide scale, represent a surreal auto-anthropology. Is he a house pet, and if so, what kind? Can he be left over the weekend like a goldfish, with the aid of some long-acting 'fish weekend' food? The scale-giving objects claim to resolve the ambiguity of the shrunken packaging, but end up casting doubt on the scale of everything. Is the artist taking up too much space? Does he consume too much? Would it be better if he too were shrunk?

Standing in Latham's old house, one cannot avoid thinking about how the Artist Placement Group that he co-founded with his wife Barbara Steveni in 1966, helped pioneer the ubiquitous residencies that would accompany the general assimilation of creativity into the commercial world that was deemed so distasteful at the time. Art's countdown to zero helped trigger the Big Bang of its expansion not only, Fluxus-style, into everyday life, but more concertedly into what would become the creative industries as well. Perversely, the socially engaged and site-specific tendencies of critical art made it more amenable to this commercial or governmental use than its prior objecthood would have allowed. Another crucial portal through which art crossed over into its expanded role within capitalism was, of course, the regeneration schemes initiated in the 1980s. The early use of art to regenerate inner cities and help reverse the middle-class exodus to the suburbs should remind us of how artists have always been implicated in the urban impact of capitalism's crises. In fact the use of art within credit-fuelled urban development attempting to forestall economic crisis began with the Haussmannisation of Paris in the late-nineteenth century.

'Implicated' is the word Frost uses to describe how he feels, and what is imbued in the thoughtfully yet oddly associated works that make up the exhibition.

The English word combines the meaning of its Latin root, *implicare*, ‘folded in’ or entwined, with its modern sense of being involved in something unsavoury, particularly a crime. This double significance of being folded into pre-existing shapes, and at the same time connected to a crime can be found in the self-interrupting humour of Frost’s work. Like laughter that can’t quite shatter the strait-jacketing of norms, his kitsch compounds made of found or locally bought objects want to shake up the contours, but constantly reassert them. The plastered together ceramic fragments which juxtapose ornamental phalluses, the porcine faces of Toby Jugs, and the anthropomorphic faces of piggy banks, show that the comforts of a stable home – or the conservative ideals of security – have become the myths of today. The joke isn’t funny, because it reveals something far worse. These sculptures aren’t cluster bombs threatening any Big Bang, but imploded dreams. And as if there were any doubt, the sculptures are mounted on a plinth that replicates the floor plan of Flat Time House itself. The explosions of laughter are silenced by the black outline of a more totalising plan.

During the course of his residency, the artist gradually discovered resonant traces of the other guardians of the house. Above all there is Latham and his habits, his flair for design, spray-gun bursts, projects, appetite for reading, and failing health. Frost shows me some of these things, like a fastidious page of notes slipped into a book on Wittgenstein, the garden’s erratic planting and the pattern of fingerprints down the edge of the door to the studio. Frost also displays traces left by previous resident artists: another comb, a Mercure Hotel door key, a biography of Van Morrison. Signs of itinerant lives.

Yet further down Bellenden Road where Flat Time House is situated, the phallic bollards erected by Antony Gormley, which declared the street safe for the middle classes, and accompanied its rebranding in 1997 as ‘Bellenden Village’, remind us that traces left by artists are not always so benignly angelic. In the words of artist Richard Whitby, a ‘live/worker’ in Bow Arts Trust’s Live/Work Scheme, artists have become ‘angels of death to the communities they are embedded within; embodied “regeneration.”’<sup>3</sup> It is this sense of embodying what is outside of oneself that Frost’s work most poignantly expresses. When we consider the artist’s role in this uncanny social process, Frost’s core methodology of imprinting, making moulds, casting or outlining takes on a deeper resonance. He explains that one night, he

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Whitby, ‘Angels, The Phoenix, Bats, Battery Hens and Vultures’, publication, publisher, city, 2011, [https://www.academia.edu/2560146/Angels\\_The\\_Phoenix\\_Bats\\_Battery\\_Hens\\_and\\_Vultures\\_The\\_Bow\\_Arts\\_Trust\\_Live\\_Work\\_Scheme](https://www.academia.edu/2560146/Angels_The_Phoenix_Bats_Battery_Hens_and_Vultures_The_Bow_Arts_Trust_Live_Work_Scheme)

soaked cloths in vinegar and left them on the Gormley bollards to take casts of their forms. In the back garden he has built a basic barbecue out of compressed sand and water, like a sandcastle. It bathetically inverts the robust and functional barbecue standing opposite that was put together by students as part of a workshop after Latham's death. If you placed a tray of sausages on top of Frost's, it would probably collapse. After art reached its zero point, the artist, who now embodies pure creativity and in this way could be said to *become* the artwork, undergoes the same separation from the world as autonomous art. On the far side of relational aesthetics, Frost is the antithesis of the barbecue party.

The presence of ghosts and the shifting scales of occupation throughout the house and exhibition create a sense that the artist himself may be disappearing. His presence is often marked through the negative manifestations of form. And of course he will soon be moving on somewhere else, having infolded the forces that surrounded him in Peckham and left some traces of his own. The question that remains on walking away is whether these conceptual compressions and material impressions threaten to detonate a charge – a 'least event' that encodes future becomings. However quietly, when amplified, the works' angelic haunting does seem to call out the rights of the living. The right to one's own embodiment.